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RACISM, RACIAL DISCRIMINATION, XENOPHOBIA AND ALL FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION

Letter dated 26 March 2001 from the Permanent Mission of Latvia to the United Nations Office at Geneva addressed to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

I have the honour to transmit herewith* the text of the statement made by H.E. Mrs. Vaira Vike-Freiberga, President of the State of the Republic of Latvia, marking the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

I would be grateful if you would issue this text as an official document of the fifty-seventh session of the Commission on Human Rights, under agenda item 6.

(Signed): Janis KARKLINS
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

* Reproduced as received, in English only.

Annex

Statement by Dr. Vaira Vike-Freiberga,
President of the Republic of Latvia,
marking the United Nations
International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

March 21, 2001

Racism and discrimination, just like prejudice, injustice and violence, are part of human nature, but they need not be an inevitable part of it. They stem in part from our biological heritage, for suspicion and mistrust arise out of the same arousal mechanisms as the wariness and alertness that allow the detection of danger. The need for survival has planted in us biologically programmed survival mechanisms for fight and flight, which translate into the intense emotions of fear, hatred, and the impulse to destroy. This is the biological heritage that makes the human race capable of deliberate harm towards others, and makes it prone to the violence, sadism and brutality from which no society on earth has ever been entirely free.

Yet we are not doomed by this heritage, for Nature can be shaped and modified by Nurture. Through training and upbringing, the human child acquires not just consciousness but also a conscience. Each society develops its own set of values, its own sense of right and wrong, which are then passed on from one generation to the next. This is culture, which represents the accumulated wisdom of countless generations.

Each culture faces the challenge of containing the aggressive and anti-social tendencies among its members, of channeling them into socially acceptable outlets. Too often, this is done by forbidding aggression towards members of the in-group, but allowing it or even encouraging it toward non-members of the group. The easiest way to accomplish this is by a simple manipulation of how we define humanity: **We** are truly human, but **they** are not.

The denial of humanity to one's enemies is, alas, as old as humanity itself. Civilized rules of self-restraint can then be conveniently restricted only to oneself and one's

own kind. The Other becomes branded as the enemy, which conveniently allows treatment by a completely different set of rules. The Enemy is something to be fought against and persecuted, especially when it is represented as the ultimate threat to the values one holds dear. In the worst case, the Enemy is to be exterminated, the world cleansed of its presence, and its very memory washed away in blood.

It does not make much difference under what label the distinction between Us and Them is made. It can be a clearly visible difference in physical appearance, and then we call it racism, it can be the biological difference between men and women, and then we call it sexism. It can be the difference between the Faithful and the Infidels, between those who subscribe to The Correct Ideology – be it a religious creed or a secular Party Line – and those who do not. The distinction between Us and Them can also be based on the language spoken, the ethnic group or tribe one belongs to, the geographical space one inhabits, or the social class one belongs to. It does not really matter what the grounds for the distinction are. The main thing is to find some excuse for marking some subcategory of people, for excluding them from full and legitimate membership in the human race.

The exercise of racism and prejudice frequently takes on the mask of righteousness. So often it claims to be exercised in the defense of fundamental values that are held dear, be they the laws of God or man, or the traditional virtues, or be it the righteous fight against vice, sin and moral pollution. How **do** we distinguish legitimate defense of righteousness from its counterfeit, which is an expression of racism or prejudice?

I believe we can achieve this by following a few very simple principles. The first and most fundamental principle of all is that of the sanctity of human life. It is a principle that has taken thousands of years to develop, and has known passionate and violent opposition throughout the centuries. It is not an easy principle to apply; yet without it, there is little hope of maintaining civilization.

The second fundamental principle is the one of equality. We must believe this truth to be self-evident, that all human beings are created equal. We must accept that all

members of the human race possess equal rights, equal privileges and equal responsibilities as part of their inherent birthright.

Racism, prejudice, discrimination, all these can be eliminated by simply accepting every human being's inalienable right to being considered as human. Young children need to be trained into accepting diversity and difference without being threatened by it. Young girls must be taught that their biological destiny as child-bearers need not exclude them from achievements in business, science, politics or the arts. Young boys must be taught that manly is not the same as brutish or brutal. All of us must learn empathy, sympathy and compassion.

These universal principles, if accepted worldwide, must of necessity take precedence over any local customs, tastes or preferences. This does not mean reducing the whole planet to mechanical uniformity. It does not mean eliminating all the differences in language, action, thought and taste that constitute the richness and variety of the world cultural heritage. But it does mean some consensus on what it means to be truly human. By accepting the dignity of every other human, we ourselves will become not only more human, but more humane as well.

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